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MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM. ITS PRACTICAL BEARINGS.

BY J. A. SMITH, D. D..

Editor of the *Standard*, Chicago.

The Bible offers itself to the student under two chief aspects,—as a literature and as a revelation. I suppose I may assume that, as a revelation, the Bible is not a subject of criticism at all. That is to say, it is not the purpose—cannot be—of rightly guided biblical study to criticise, or subject to rationalistic tests of any kind whatever, *ascertained* revelation. There may be, and is often, a question as to what *is* revelation: as to what is the *meaning* of language, made the vehicle of the divine thought or message. But surely, it is no violent assumption to take it for granted that, once ascertained, the revelation is a subject, not for criticism, but for faith.

Another preliminary view which seems to require no argument is that what we have to preach and teach, in our efforts to bring others under the sway of Bible truth, is not the Bible as literature, but the Bible as revelation. The literary element may be a great help to us in teaching, or in seeking to illustrate and impress the revealed truth; but that which we aim at, as the ultimate, real purpose, is not to interest others in the Bible as literature, but to make them feel its power as truth; or, if the former of these may be to some extent proposed and sought, it must always be in subordination to, and in the service of, the latter.

I. Now, the first point which seems to offer itself for more extended consideration is this,—that we ought, in dealing practically with the work and results of biblical criticism, to frankly admit that such criticism, applied to the Bible as literature, is, in itself, entirely legitimate; and that it is in no wise inconsistent, when rightly conducted, with

due reverence for the Bible as revelation. Of course, we use the word "criticism" here, in that sense which has come to be conventionally an accepted one, in this connection. There is a process of this nature through which all ancient literatures need to pass, not so much—as in the case of that which is modern—to ascertain its worth and value, or to test its conformity to admitted rules of literary excellence, but with a view to settle a variety of questions, which must necessarily arise in connection with writings whose date lies perhaps thousands of years back of our own, and which are due to conditions radically unlike existing ones. When the gates of the Sanskrit, swinging wide, gave admission to that wonderful domain of ancient intellectual life, no one can be surprised that the favored explorers who entered there, felt that more was required of them than simply to discover and admire. Those who were not thus favored had, indeed, the right to expect of them that they would bring reports of researches on that field in which should appear the results of intelligent scrutiny, assignments of that old literature to its appropriate dates, exhibitions of it in due mutual relations, with real and valuable accessions to our knowledge of that dim old world, as found in what there remains of its thought, its worship, and its life. So with the Egyptian papyrus, or the Chaldæan tablet. The rich results of exploration and decipherment simply provide new work for the critic. Archæology without him would be scarcely better than a pathless jungle, in which any ordinary student must infallibly lose his way.

Now, we have long since ceased to feel any strong impression from the fact,—which nevertheless is a notable one,—that the Bible which lies on our tables, or in our pulpits, is a literature, in the earlier portions of it, belonging to a past as ancient, perhaps more ancient, than any of these others. While these books—for the Bible is more a library than a book—while these books were in course of preparation, Chaldæa, and Babylon, and Egypt, and Assyria, and Phœnicia, and Greece, and Rome, each played its great part on the scene of empire. The Hebrew writer was contemporaneous with the Aryan, the Chaldæan, and the Egyptian. The Hebrew nation had a literature long before the date of any that survives of the Greeks. The roots of this literature, in fact, lie far back in the world before the flood; the oldest, most truly primitive utterance anywhere to be heard in human speech.

Such, at least, as this the Bible presents itself to us. If there are those who are interested to examine into the evidences of this high antiquity, either for the whole, or for portions of the earlier books; if scholars, competent to the task, feel themselves called to a scrutiny of

this old literature, somewhat of the same nature as that applied to other literary monuments of the same general period; even if their conclusions are, in some instances, out of harmony with what has perhaps been long accepted without scrutiny,—it seems to be a line of inquiry to which the very antiquity of these books necessarily invites, and a form of service which, for those prepared for it, may be even a duty. Even where it may seem to us that the enthusiasm of the specialist carries him away, or that the critic fails to set forth upon his career of scrutiny from first principles sufficiently sound and safe, we ought, in any case, to admit without demur that the work itself, so undertaken, is equally legitimate and necessary. We ought not to demand that, in an age when archæological research is achieving such wonders in every part of that ancient world where the first human abodes were built, the book in our hands which is, even in an archæological point of view, so significant in all its relations, and so precious in itself, shall remain for purposes of learned inquiry with a jealous seal of pre-appropriation upon its every page. Whether we agree with him at all points or not, must we not grant, in a spirit of warm and high appreciation, that the reverent and careful biblical critic devotes himself to one of the noblest functions to which scholarship and genius can be called?

II. The second point upon which I dwell for a little time is, that the findings of the critics are themselves, even for us who are not critics, fairly and justly open to scrutiny. This sounds so much like a truism, that I hesitate to state it in this form; and still I can think of no other way in which to put succinctly what I have in mind. And besides, after what has just been said, this which I now urge cannot be omitted. It is another truism, perhaps, in some sense, to say that the conviction of another mind, however gifted or well informed, cannot be a conviction for us. Yet, in certain cases, we find occasion to affirm this to ourselves, if not openly.

To take an instance lying close at hand, where a certain critic denies the Messianic character of the Second Psalm, we may any of us have a right to feel astonished at finding him reasoning in this way: "This psalm is quoted in the New Testament, and applied to Messiah by the early Christian disciples in Jerusalem (Acts IV., 25); by Paul (XIII., 3); and by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews (I., 5). We may therefore presume that it was the current interpretation of the day. Yet internal evidence is against the exposition." It is certainly competent for any one of us in such a case as this to decide for himself whether to accept Dr. Davidson's ideas as to the "internal evidence" of the psalm,—what he understands it to say for itself as to its own

Messianic character or otherwise,—as against the usage of inspired men, witnesses appointed and endowed by Messiah himself. We may even go so far as to judge for ourselves what the psalm does really mean, and whether the king seated upon the holy hill of Zion is not far more likely to be, in the sublime phraseology used, the King of kings than either David or his son, whether a strain so lofty and so exulting can be fairly treated if belittled to the proportions of an earthly sovereignty and a material throne, though it should be that of a Solomon or a David.

Some use might be in point here of the fact, how seldom it is that critical judgments of this nature carry with them the suffrages of enlightened Christian opinion to such an extent as to give them justification or endorsement. They meet with much the same fortune as we observe, under like conditions, in general literature. The destructive critic, even when he is in the right, sets himself a hard task: much more when he is in the wrong. Even the poems of Ossian seem hard to discredit; for ever and again some cultured scholar comes forward, if not to justify Macpherson, nevertheless to treat the poems themselves as representative of what may belong to the literary annals of a primitive people. That Homer was a genuine personality, and that both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were his own matchless achievements in epic song, the world goes on believing, in spite of the German critic who first denied both the one and the other of these, and in spite of all who have laboriously followed in his steps. It required all the genius, all the learning, and all the immense fighting capacity of Richard Bentley to pull down the “*Letters of Phalaris*” from the high place where Temple and Boyle had set them; while even Bentley’s learned and caustic criticism of the various editions of *Æsop* leaves the Phrygian fabulist just where he was before in the world’s homage and faith. It seems a difficult matter to displace from among even the dramas of Shakspeare plays manifestly not his; and, as to the Shakspearean authorship of these dramas as a whole, it is doubtful if a mathematical demonstration could really put Bacon in the place of the Stratford miracle, whom the world has wondered after so long. As for instances more germane to the present subject, doubtless there are those who are thoroughly convinced that the author of the Fourth Gospel and the author of the Apocalypse cannot have been one and the same person, and still, do we see any signs of this judgment of the matter prevailing as a final one? Ewald’s recent testimony on this point shows that even the critical mind finds satisfactory evidence for at least the Johannean authorship of the Gospel named,—a point which so many have either doubted or denied. Is it not singular that a work of such striking lit-

erary merit as Renan's "*Vie de Jesus*" should be such a failure as to all the ends for which it seems to have been mainly written? And that the mythical theories of Strauss as to the same Man of Nazareth should be, as to any real effect in shaping opinion, very much as if they had never been invented? I suppose that Homer will be Homer so long as the Greek language survives, and Shakspeare will be Shakspeare till the last English book has perished out of the world; and we may feel equally certain that Moses will be Moses, and Isaiah will be Isaiah, and John will be the author of the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse, and the life of Jesus will be the centre of all history, the manifestation of God in the flesh, "very God of very God," till Bible history, and promise, and prophecy, have their final consummation in the millenium.

It is true enough that a man, whether the author of some critical theory, or of some new view in physical science, or of some invention in the application of mechanics, may be right, and still not succeed in mastering the general conviction of mankind. But the point is, that very confident theorists do fail in this way; that very brilliant performances in the way of attempts at revolutionizing opinion do often remain as brilliant performances merely; and that therefore no theorist can claim dominion over us just by right of genius or by right of learning, however super-abounding and miraculous. And this the more when, as is so often the case, the vital point in the whole issue, whatever that may be, is assumed or supposed, and then reasoned from as if already proved. There is no such magical incantation in the letters "Q. E. D." as will change theory and hypothesis into demonstration.

III. And then, while, let me next observe, we, as Christian workers and teachers, claim the right to judge for ourselves as to the findings of biblical critics, there are reasons why we should, at the same time, see in the modern biblical criticism, in its general character and tendency, what reveals in it, or in connection with it, a Providential purpose. We remember how Voltaire, in his old age, once said to an English visitor: "When critics are silent, it does not so much prove the age to be correct, as dull." So we may say that the worst possible attitude of the world toward the Bible is that of dull indifference. While it is painful to see valued men carried to dangerous extremes by their zeal as specialists; and perhaps the scepticism, even the infidelity of the age, encouraged and supported by the critical theories of scholars who probably are far enough from having any such purpose, still, even this is better, or rather is not so bad as that stupid unconcern which would treat the Bible, whether as literature or as revelation,

as something so slight as to be not even worth attacking. And meanwhile, the critical spirit of the time takes directions in which we may well rejoice. It reaches men fully equal in genius and scholarship to those whose self-appointed mission it seems to be to pull down, and who, upon the other hand, find a far higher mission in building-up. In the hands of such as these, what threatened mischief is turned to good: they catch the weapon as it flies, and use it in courageous and effective defense. The Bible does not suffer in the long run, even when men say the worst they can of it; and when the sincere, but mistaken critic sets some before unnoticed peculiarity in a strong light, so as to fix attention upon it, there is all the more an opportunity for one his equal in ability and his superior in soundness of view, to show what, and no more, the thing in question really imports. Besides, we may say with emphasis that the adversary never overreaches himself more fatally than when by instigating attack upon the Bible, or upon any part of it, he makes Bible-students, where otherwise Bible-study might never have been thought of as having attractions.

IV. It seems to belong to the line of remark here followed that I should say a few things upon what I may call the self-vindictory element in the Bible. We may thus encourage ourselves by taking note how the Bible itself meets and deals with the unfriendly or mistaken critic. It is with the Scripture somewhat as with that marvelous personality sketched for us in the gospels. Is it because so many wise and able and good men have borne testimony in his behalf that the Man of Sorrows has, more and more, age by age, revealed the form and feature of divinity; out of the depths of humiliation once, and now from the heights of infinite enthronement, manifesting God? Or, is it because that personality is its own best witness? And that other word of God, which in another sense was "in the beginning;" and which, in its own way, is "the same yesterday, to-day, and forever." Can you find any scar on the radiant face, so often smitten? Do you see any sign of weakness or wavering in the attitude in which it stands before the world, even in this time, when atheist and materialist and rationalist are all in arms against it? Save as seen in the calm, self-contained, loving, and sovereign reign of the Christ, I know of nothing in this world so sublime as the simple steadfastness of the Bible, rising like a rock out of the roaring sea of human hate and obloquy.

It may be in place for me to notice here two of the various ways in which the self-vindictory element in the Bible reveals itself. (1) The first is in the fact that what seemed at the outset a question touching what is most radical in our faith in the Bible as a whole, or in particular books, or in what seems to be vital matters of date, authorship,

authenticity, or even truthfulness, is so often found to be, after all, mainly or wholly a question of interpretation. I need not dwell upon this. There are many yet living who can recall the feeling of sensitive alarm with which the criticism by geologists of the Mosaic account of creation was at first viewed. Darwinism seemed at first so formidable in its attitude as to call for the marshalling of the whole phalanx of theological defense. As we have seen Moses, Isaiah, and John, called before these tribunals of modern criticism, we have perhaps listened with nervous anxiety for their answer. Somehow, it is seldom, indeed, that the apprehensions of those who hold by the faith of the Fathers are justified. The question at issue turns out to be a question of interpretation, or of the way in which to explain some peculiarity, or some other point of difficulty, which, just because it arises so naturally in the study of a literature such as this of the Bible, is so much the less to be fairly viewed as an impeachment of its genuineness or of its veracity. Who imagines, now, that "the divine legation of Moses" must depend upon the possibility of our believing that God made the world in six literal days? Who, save some reckless infidel, tests the inspiration of the whole Old Testament by the question whether in answer to the prayer of Joshua, God made the sun and moon to actually stand still in the heavens? Who thinks that the inspiration of the author of Genesis is impeached, even if it shall turn out that he used in his writing historical material in the form of ancient documents, or even tradition? Inquiry upon such matters is useful, as helping us know the Bible better; but at bottom they have so far been mostly, and I believe will ultimately be all found to be such in their nature, and the result of the inquiry such as to change what seemed like serious arraignment, into questions of exegesis, or points for critical study and elucidation.

(2) The only other form of this self-vindictory element in the Bible as literature, of which I shall speak, is in its character as a revelation. Not only does the Bible as literature illustrate the Bible as revelation, but the Bible as revelation supplies an important principle for estimating it as literature. Every divine work exhibits symmetry, a due order and law in the adjustment of its parts. God's buildings are all examples of a perfect divine architecture. It is admitted that we cannot, in a fair method of argument, assume the inspiration of the Bible, and then infer this or that as to the order, or authorship, or other peculiarity, of the several books. But this seems legitimate, to view the two great features of the Bible in their connection, and to mark how in mutual harmony and mutual alliance they are. Now, as a revelation, the Bible is a perfect system. Take the several books in their now

accepted order,—that order which they seem to have had in all the centuries in which their literary consecution can be certainly traced,—and revealed religion, in its two grand dispensations, with another, the millennial one, yet to come, grows from the dim and faint beginning of the first Edenic promise, age by age, along the line of patriarchal, Mosaic, and prophetic ministry, till the seed of the woman at last appears, and that is seen and heard which kings and prophets waited for. It is not a system mechanically constructed. The adjusting agent is not a *mechanism*, but a *principle*. We need not be surprised if critical study of the several parts raises questions, upon which equally honest inquirers may differ. But of this we may be certain: not only does “the firm *foundation* of God stand,” but the whole building stands, its own justification. There is no more danger that any essential dislocation of the structure will ever take place, than that the order of nature will be essentially disturbed, till it is time for the new heavens and new earth to appear, if even then.

V. From all this, now, I venture to draw a few inferences as to the practical bearings of modern biblical criticism, considered with reference to those of us who are not critics, but simply workers and teachers.

(1) The first is suggested by the fact to which attention has been drawn,—that it is the Bible as revelation which we are really to teach, and not the Bible as literature, any further than as this second aspect of it may be available for the high uses of the first. There would seem to be, therefore, no good reason why Christian work, in any of its spheres, should be in any way embarrassed, while debate upon critical questions goes forward among those whose studies, or whose special forms of service, give occasion for critical inquiry. In the pulpit or in the Bible-school, and in similar spheres of Christian labor, we shall find enough that is beyond debate, and this what is infinitely the essential matter in our Christianity, to fully occupy us, and to answer, better than doubtful disquisitions of any kind, the ends of our calling as Christians, and as Christian teachers.

(2) At the same time, secondly, the Christian intelligence of the age, whether in the ministry or elsewhere, must not ignore these debates among critics as something which it can afford to wholly disregard. While, as already noticed, such critical studies in the literature of the Bible are legitimate and useful, their ascertained results are of real value, and our practical Christianity cannot be thoroughly intelligent, unless more or less well-informed with regard to them. I would not, certainly, have such matters brought to the attention of immature minds, or of those whose religious convictions are in process of growth

and determination, any further than may be necessary to meet such casual suggestions of difficulty as may occur. But the point is, that a well-informed Christian should be well-informed upon those subjects of current investigation in which results of study and research and exploration are utilized in the interests of Christian truth. Especially should every Christian minister be thus well-informed, if for no other reason, because every teacher ought to know, so far as possible, all there is to know upon that which he teaches, whether he has occasion to teach it all, or not.

(3) What I would next infer from the general view taken in this paper, is, that it should be kept always in mind, that there will ever be, in such inquiries as are here under view, more or less that must be held, for the time being, in a state of suspense. While in one way there is a tendency with us to be suspicious of what is new, in the form of fact or theory, there is also, in another way, a tendency to favor what is new, if at the moment it impresses us agreeably, simply because it is new. That is to say, we get rather tired of the old view with its difficulties, large or small, and welcome a new one, even though it, also, has its difficulties, because, at least, these difficulties are themselves new, and because finding the enemy on another flank, we can bring fresh troops into the field. Or we may imagine that the new banner is the banner of a friend and join ranks where we ought to resist. I do not know that there will ever be a time when all the perplexities of biblical study shall be disposed of. I am not sure but it has been providentially so arranged, that there may always be things of this kind to stir human inertness, to move and rouse sluggish minds, always so apt to be sluggish where the things of religion are concerned. Let us settle it beforehand, that there are questions in biblical criticism which it is equally rash for the critic and for ourselves to settle categorically, and at once. Let us be sure not to forget that the holding of such questions in a certain attitude of suspense is not to impeach the truth of the Bible, nor the truth of such portions of it as are thus under examination. The truth is always the truth; and whether we reach it to-day or to-morrow, in this century or the next, it will still be truth when we do reach it at last.

(4) Finally, I cannot better conclude all, than in those words of Bacon's "Student's Prayer," with which the scholarly Farrar closes an able paper, upon a subject somewhat in kindred with this which we have here considered: "This [also we humbly and earnestly beg, that human things may not prejudice such as are divine: neither that from the unlocking of the gates of sense, and the kindling of a greater natural light, any thing of incredulity or intellectual might may arise in

our minds, towards divine mysteries; but rather that by our minds thoroughly cleansed and purged from fancy and vanities, and yet subject and perfectly given up to the divine oracles, there may be given unto faith such things as are faith's."

[Read before the Baptist Autumnal Conference, Boston, Nov. 14, 1888.]

THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS AND THE MOSAIC ORIGIN OF THE PENTATEUCH.

BY REV. NEWELL WOOLSEY WELLS,
Brooklyn, E. D.

In a series of articles lately published in the *Independent*, Professor Francis Brown, of Union Theological Seminary, gave the testimony of the New Testament Scriptures concerning the authorship of the Pentateuch. The conclusion at which the Professor arrived was that no warrant is to be found in those Scriptures for regarding as the literary composition of Moses other than a few scattered texts in the first five books of the Bible, and that, therefore, the inference that our Lord and his apostles held to the generally accepted view of the authorship of the Pentateuch has no basis in fact.

Though not acquiescing in the conclusion of the Professor it is not our desire to canvas the ground so thoroughly gone over by him. Our purpose is rather to ascertain, if possible, what was the conviction of the early church as it found expression in the writings of the Fathers. Certain is it that no conviction, whatever its character, attains wide currency in a brief period of time unless it may have the forced development that ensues upon a supernatural revelation. Ideas, like seeds, in order to their dissemination require the processes of successive seasons. Growth is a factor that must be taken into account in every harvest. And if we shall succeed in showing that the Fathers, following close upon the footsteps of the Apostles, held to the Mosaic origin of the greater portion of the Pentateuch, we shall certainly feel ourselves warranted in ascribing a like conviction to the Apostles themselves.

Our method will be to trace the evidence back from the close of the third century toward the days of the Apostles, taking first the testimony of the later writers, then that of those immediately preceding them, and so on until we come to that of those whose lives overlapped the period known as Apostolic.

In beginning our study we remark this fact, that in but one volume of all the early writings of the church is there to be found an out-and-out denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and this is but a denial that the manual work of writing was performed by Moses in person. This denial may be found in the second "Clementine Homily," chap. xxxviii., and in the third Homily, chap. xlvii. The latter passage is interesting enough for quotation in full. "And Peter said: 'The Law of God was given by Moses, without writing, to seventy wise men, to be handed down, that the government might be carried on by succession. But after that Moses was taken up, it was written by some one, but not by Moses. For in the law itself it is written, "And Moses died; and they buried him," etc. But how could Moses write that Moses died?' " It will thus be seen that the modern "higher critic" is but treading the path marked out for